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The Eighth Eclogue by Vergil

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The Eighth Eclogue by Vergil

Cover Page Footnote

Warm thanks to my colleague Emily Anhalt for her astute comments on my translation and to the anonymous referee for helpful comments and suggestions.

Ann Lauinger
The Eighth Eclogue

Vergil
Ecloga VIII

The art of Damon and Alpheisiboeus,
Contending shepherds who made the cow in wonder
Forget to graze, whose song left lynxes stunned
And stilled the altered course of streams, the art
Of Damon and Alpheisiboeus I'll tell. 5
But you (and where are you now? passing the rocks
Of great Timavus? coasting Illyricum's shore?),
Will that day ever come when I'm allowed
To tell what you have done? And shall I be
Allowed to show the world at large your songs, 10
The only worthy heirs of Sophocles'?
From you was my beginning, and in you
I hope to end. Accept these songs, begun
At your behest; around your brow, among
Its conqueror's laurels, let this ivy twine. 15

The chilly shades of night had hardly left
The sky, and dew, the herd's delight, still clung
To the tender grass when, leaning on a smooth
Olive trunk, Damon thus began his song.

Damon: "Rise, morning star, and shine before the break 20
Of kindly day, while I complain, beguiled
By the unworthy love of Nysa, my promised bride,
And, a dying man, appeal to the gods
In my last hour—even though those gods
Have witnessed all and profited me nothing. 25

Begin with me, my flute, these Maenalian verses.

Mt. Maenalus always has his sounding groves,
His speaking pines. He always hears the loves
Of shepherds; he hears Pan, the first who would
Not let the reeds rest voiceless and unused. 30

Begin with me, my flute, these Maenalian verses.

Nysa is given to Mopsus! Now what may
We lovers not expect? Griffins will mate
With horses next, and in the future age
The shy deer will lap their drink with dogs.

35

Begin with me, my flute, these Maenalian verses.

Mopsus, cut fresh torches: they're leading in
The bride to you. Bridegroom, scatter the nuts:
For you the evening star deserts Mount Oeta.

Begin with me, my flute, these Maenalian verses.

40

O, that's a worthy man with whom you're matched!
And you, meanwhile, despising everyone,
Hating my pipe, my goats, my shaggy brows
And scruffy beard, and not believing any
Of the gods is mindful of the lives of men.

45

Begin with me, my flute, these Maenalian verses.

I saw you first a little girl inside
Our garden with your mother, picking apples
Wet with dew. I was your guide, just
Turned twelve; now, standing, I could grasp
The fragile boughs. I saw and I was lost.
So the deadly madness stole me away!

50

Begin with me, my flute, these Maenalian verses.

I know now what Love is: Mount Rhodope
Or Tmaros or remotest Africa
Brought forth that boy on the hard flint, for he
Is neither of our blood nor of our kind.

55

Begin with me, my flute, these Maenalian verses.

Savage Love taught a mother to stain her hands

With her sons' blood; mother, you too were cruel. 60
Was the mother crueler, or the boy Love more heartless?
The boy was heartless; mother, you too were cruel.

Begin with me, my flute, these Maenalian verses.

Now let the wolf turn tail and flee the sheep;
Let the hard oak trees bear golden apples, 65
And alders flower with narcissus blooms;
Let tamarisks sweat rich amber from their bark,
And owls contend with swans. Let Tityrus
Be Orpheus, an Orpheus of the woods,
And with the dolphins let him be Arion! 70

Begin with me, my flute, these Maenalian verses.

Let the deep sea swallow all! Forests, farewell!
Down from the lofty mountain summit I
Will fling myself headlong into the waves.
Take this, the last gift of a dying man. 75

Now cease, my flute, cease these Maenalian verses."

So Damon sang. Alpheisiboeus's answer,
Muses, you tell. We can't all do all things.

Alpheisiboeus: "Carry the water out and tie a strip
Of cloth around this altar. Burn the strong 80
Frankincense, the pungent vervain boughs,
And let me try with magic rites to drive
My lover out of his stone-sober mind!
There's nothing wanting now except the spells:

Draw him home from town, my spells, draw Daphnis. 85

For spells have power even to draw the moon
Down from the sky. With spells Circe transformed
Ulysses's comrades; singing spells can force
The clammy meadow snake to burst its skin.

Draw him home from town, my spells, draw Daphnis.

90

This triple thread, three different colors, first
I tie around you; three times then I lead
Your effigy around the altar here.
Uneven numbers are the god's delight.

Draw him home from town, my spells, draw Daphnis.

95

Tie the three colors, Amaryllis,
In triple knots; just tie them, Amaryllis,
And say, 'Here I tie the chains of love.'

Draw him home from town, my spells, draw Daphnis.

As this mud hardens and as this wax melts
In one and the same fire, may Daphnis thus
Obey the double fire of my love.
Sprinkle the meal and set the brittle laurel
Aflame with pitch. Wicked Daphnis makes me burn;
Against Daphnis I burn this laurel here.

100

105

Draw him home from town, my spells, draw Daphnis.

May love take hold of Daphnis like a heifer
That, tired out with searching for her bull
Through the deep woods and groves, collapses, spent,
In the green sedge along a river bank,
But has no thought of giving up the search
Although the night is late: such love I wish
On Daphnis—and may I not care to cure it.

110

Draw him home from town, my spells, draw Daphnis.

Here are clothes the betrayer left me once
As precious pledges of himself. I commit
Them now to you, earth, on my doorstep,
And in exchange claim Daphnis as my due.

115

Draw him home from town, my spells, draw Daphnis.

Moeris himself gave me these poisonous herbs 120
Gathered in Pontus (many such grow in Pontus).
I've seen Moeris often with these herbs
Become a wolf, lurking in the woods; often
I've seen him call up souls of the buried dead
Or lead the standing crops from field to field. 125

Draw him home from town, my spells, draw Daphnis.

Now, Amaryllis, take the ashes out,
Throw them over your head and in the stream,
But don't look back. With them I'll besiege Daphnis:
He's full of scorn for the gods and magic spells. 130

Draw him home from town, my spells, draw Daphnis.

Look! The ash—before I could take it out—
Itself fired the altar with wavering flames!
May it mean good! I'm sure there's something—Hylax
Is barking at the door. Can it be true? 135
Or do lovers shape their dreams to their own desires?

Enough now, spells, enough! From town comes Daphnis."

“Eclogue 8” is one of four singing contests in the *Eclogues*. A narrator sets the scene in an opening frame, introducing the two competitors. Both songs are of unhappy love, and each includes a refrain repeated ten times, the last time in altered form. Though both songs are in the first person, the singer is not necessarily the protagonist of his song. Damon sings of losing his beloved to another, while Alphesiboeus more obviously impersonates a speaker, a woman attempting to recover her wandering lover through magic. The ambiguous endings of both songs and the absence of a closing frame for the eclogue combine to blur the line between art and life, impersonation and reality in this mysterious poem.

In translating Vergil’s “Eighth Eclogue,” I didn’t want to update it. The pastoral world of the *Eclogues* is a rich literary convention with its own integrity, a world that is mythic in its idealizing but that also, precisely because of its distance from the real world, invites allusion to and criticism of the real world. My general aim was to let readers experience the visual and aural beauty of Vergil’s pastoral world, along with a sense of its otherness. Choosing blank verse both for its flexibility and as a rough equivalent of Vergil’s dactylic hexameter, I did not attempt to match one English line for every line of Latin, since English syntax has nothing like the succinctness of Latin; and I largely gave up the hope of reproducing Vergil’s word order within the poetic line, since the heavily inflected nature of Latin allows much greater flexibility in that regard. The *Eclogues* generally employ rather simple diction and syntax for Vergil’s imagined rustic speakers, reflecting the literary principle of decorum. Yet with that simplicity, and with the epic associations of dactylic hexameter, Vergil confers a shapeliness and dignity on the actions and feelings of his characters and the sensuous concreteness of their world. The simplicity of Vergil’s diction intensifies a problem faced by any translator from Latin: the language’s word stock is small relative to that of English, so that a single Latin word may convey several distinct meanings. Does fidelity require that a repeated word in the Latin be represented by the same English word each time it occurs? I usually tried to do this. Twice, however, different contexts required rather different English translations for a repeated word, as noted below. In general, I tried to use English that was idiomatic yet not always colloquial. The aim, at least, was to find a tone whose simple, slightly formal syntax and diction would avoid both the awkwardness of some strictly literal renderings and the jarring effect of modernisms which, though they might be “user-friendly,” would violate the conventions and break the spell of the mythic pastoral world. To that end, I let stand most place names and proper names, though I preferred the more familiar “Muses” to “Pierides” (78). I occasionally expanded the Latin slightly to explain or clarify something a Roman audience would have known: for example, specifying “Mt. Maenalus” (27) and, in the allusion to the pipes of Pan (29–30), translating a single Latin adjective, *inertis*, by two English ones, “voiceless and unused,” to render the myth more explicit for modern readers. I also expanded *puer* (“the boy”) to “the boy Love” (61). By contrast, however, the child-murdering mother in

lines 59–62, instantly recognizable to Roman readers as Medea, is identified only in the note below, for the sake of the tone and complicated rhetorical structure of the stanza. A few more specific comments follow.

6–15: Commentators have been divided over the identity of this nameless dedicatee, who might plausibly be G. Asinius Pollio (76 B.C.E.–4 C.E.) or Octavian, the future Augustus. Vergil’s omission of a definite identity for the addressee contributes to the poem’s mysterious tone. (I am grateful to *Transference*’s anonymous referee for this thought.)

14–15: The English fails to capture the intricate Latin word order, a lovely imitation of the literal interweaving of ivy and laurel: *hanc sine tempora circum / inter victrices hederam tibi serpere lauros*.

22: “promised bride” (*coniunx*). The Latin word can mean spouse and here implies a betrothal, but perhaps only in the protagonist’s understanding, not Nysa’s. That we have no way of ascertaining this is one of many instances of the eclogue’s blurring of subjective and objective reality.

33–35: These “impossibilities” (*adynata*), like the set in lines 64–72, express the upside-down world created for the speaker by Nysa’s betrayal.

52: “deadly madness” translates *malus error*, to convey the destructive and pathological power of love. I have translated a later occurrence of *malus* (“bad”) differently (see note to line 104).

59–62: The mother is Medea. The artful repetition, juxtaposition, and chiasmus in the Latin lines are imperfectly captured by the translation.

68: Tityrus is one of the speakers in Ecl. 1. To compare his pastoral music with that of the mythic singers Orpheus or Arion is as absurd as the other unnatural “impossibilities” in the catalogue.

75–77: A curious triple ending to the first half of the poem. The protagonist’s dramatic arc ends in his imminent suicide; the tenth and final refrain with its altered verb brings his utterance/Damon’s song to its formal close; and the eclogue’s narrator recalls the opening frame, the “actual” circumstances of the singing contest.

79–137: In its depiction of a magic ritual, Alpheisiboeus’s song is a kind of performative speech act and leads us deeper into the blurring of language and reality that informs the whole eclogue. Throughout, the incantation’s repeated words, parallel phrases, and delicately varied word order beautifully pattern the language (just as a spell uses language to pattern reality) in more ways than English allows.

83: “my lover” translates the same word (*coniunx*) which in Damon’s song was used of Nysa, the “promised bride” (22). As in Damon’s song, the speaker asserts a commitment (marriage? betrothal? sweet talk?) that may exist only in her mind. English doesn’t readily provide a male parallel to “promised bride,” and “husband” seemed too definitive for a relationship the poem leaves undefined.

104: “Wicked” here tries to convey the sense of *malus* for someone who maliciously uses magic to inflict harm, an ironic accusation for the speaker, given what she’s doing. (My thanks to *Transference’s* anonymous referee for both these points.)

132–37: As with Damon’s song, a complex ending and one remaining open in many ways. “Look!...May it mean good!” may be the protagonist’s words or her servant’s. The “wavering” of the flames suggests uncertainty even while the reignited ash constitutes an omen (but of what?). The final, altered refrain asserts that the spell has been successful, yet it is impossible to override the profound ambiguity of the lines immediately preceding. Compare Nisus’s similar musing in the *Aeneid*: “Is it the gods who kindle this passion in our minds, or does the terrible desire of each man become a god to him?” (*Nisus ait: “dine hunc ardorem mentibus addunt, / Euryale, an sua cuique fit dira cupido?”* [9.184–85]). In a final blurring of the real and the imagined, the eclogue closes without returning to its opening narrative frame.